

Welcoming Remarks



Opening Ceremony

*Second Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning
("Transforming Education for Development")*

*Durban, South Africa
29 July 2002*

*by
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Chairman
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Professor Asmal, The Honourable Minister of Education for South Africa,
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen

One hundred years from now, historians will be looking back at the events of today, not the least this Forum, and passing judgement on our recorded successes and failures. In the field of education, surely one overwhelming issue of judgement will be the extent to which the Education For All declaration, pledging universal access to basic education by the year 2015, was fulfilled. Can anyone contemplate with equanimity the failure to do so? Can anyone argue that there is anything more significant in the broad area of human resource development than the extension of educational opportunity for all? Basic education, secondary schooling, tertiary teaching, vocational and technical training, occupational preparation and, ultimately, the too often perceived luxury of lifelong learning continue to dominate our development agendas - and that is why we are all here.

But, hovering over the educational landscape are the ever-present dark clouds which threaten to dampen the fulfilment of our educational objectives. I refer, of course, to:

inadequacy of resources;

institutional rigidity;

bureaucratic constraints;

pedagogical inhibitions; and

lack of political resolve.

Of one thing I am certain - the educational demands of today will never be met by so-called conventional means. It is now nearly fifty years since my good friend and colleague, the late Marshall McLuhan, began describing "the global village" and advocating "schools without walls". Of those two concepts, although the first is more often cited, I believe the second is more compelling - how to take education to students as opposed to taking students to education. Compelling because this led to the exploration by the whole new world of distance education and open learning which we are here to celebrate. But we are here not just to celebrate but to develop, improve, and employ open learning in the task of meeting the Education For All objective.

And so, I am pleased that the Commonwealth of Learning, having sponsored and organised the first Pan-Commonwealth Forum in Brunei in 1999, is now associated with our partners in staging in South Africa the second Pan-Commonwealth Forum. Why is this so important to us? It is important because it provides such fertile soil from which we can draw knowledge and know-how. I am often asked "how does the Commonwealth of Learning determine what route to follow and what services to provide?" The answer is really rather simple - you, the distance education experts from the Commonwealth, can show us the way. The Commonwealth of Learning is an organisation of the members of the Commonwealth and, as such, it is you who are assisting in defining the needs of Commonwealth countries for educational services so that my colleagues in Vancouver can craft the correct response.

And how well are we doing? These are days of pre-occupation with programme evaluation, and results-based management. While that is undeniably important, there is another form of evaluation. At the triennial meeting of the Commonwealth Education Ministers in Halifax, Canada in November 2000, some 34 Ministers of Education complimented COL on its work and spoke in highly specific terms about the relevance of its contribution in their own countries. Can there be any more significant endorsement?

This Forum brings together nearly 700 participants, including 12 Ministers of Education, to provide a Commonwealth-wide opportunity for exchange of experiences both in terms of programmes that have worked well and - of equal importance - those that may not have worked at all. Your knowledge is invaluable for the hearty band of warriors that make up the Commonwealth of Learning.

As a Chairman who is about to conclude my own duties after nine years, I am extremely proud of the accomplishments of my colleagues under the leadership of our President, Raj Dhanarajan. I know that you will be as pleased as I am when I tell you that, this weekend, our Board unanimously invited Raj to extend his term of office beyond next year.

Ladies and Gentlemen - welcome to all and best wishes for a journey dedicated to narrowing distance and broadening understanding, to widening opportunity and eliminating intolerance, to expanding human rights and ending all oppression.